

# The Alexander Thomson Society NEWSLETTER

Nº 2 OCTOBER 1991

## CASES

### HOLMWOOD

The fate of this villa in Netherlee Road, Cathcart, has been the principal pre-occupation of the Society since its foundation. Without doubt Thomson's finest house, and fully illustrated in exquisite plates in Blackie's 'Villa and Cottage Architecture' published in 1868, Holmwood remains in a good state of preservation. Although the original furniture designed by Thomson has been dispersed, the house could be fully restored. Many feel that what Hill House is to Mackintosh, Holmwood is to Thomson, and that in the future, the house ought to be preserved in the public domain.

It has been known for some time that the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, who own Holmwood, would be leaving the house, as the school they run in the adjacent buildings is to move to another site in 1992. Persistent rumours that the house had been sold to a developer led us to approach the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions in Middlesex, who referred us to their Glasgow solicitors. Messrs Franchi, Wright & Co, the solicitors, then informed us that the sale of Holmwood had been concluded "after extensive advertising last year".

This statement surprised all those who have taken an interest in the property: the truth is that it has been sold, in secret, to a property company, but that the purchase is conditional on

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## SECRETARY'S REPORT

Some months have passed since our first Newsletter was sent out but, notwithstanding the silence, the nascent Alexander Thomson Society has not been inactive. Our first task must be to defend Thomson buildings, and we have been much involved with the future of Holmwood, as well as with the other cases listed below.

The society now has 341 members, a majority of whom live in the Glasgow area, but by no means all. We have many members in England, a handful in the United States, and even one in France—which merely demonstrates Thomson's international stature. Our Acting Committee consists of Mark Baines, Roger Emmerson, Roger Guthrie, Joe Lunardi, James Macaulay and Alexander Stoddart, while Veronica Wright has acted as our secretary. Sam McKinstry is our Acting Honorary Treasurer and Dominic d'Angelo has placed membership

details onto computer and is responsible for the much-improved appearance of this Newsletter.

I say 'Acting' Committee because, as yet, we are unconstituted. This inevitable but unsatisfactory state of affairs will be resolved at our first Annual General Meeting on November 4th, when a Committee and Officers can be properly elected by the membership. I very much hope other members will put themselves up for election. Any society such as ours, if it is to function well and fulfil its members' aspirations, needs volunteers to run it. At present, much of the work devolves upon the Acting Secretary who, whatever his qualities, is by no means a paragon of bureaucratic efficiency. So we need help—but the cause is a good one: that, after all, is why you have joined the Alexander Thomson Society.

*Gavin Stamp  
Acting Secretary*

## DIARY DATES

- Sunday, 6th October, 2.30 pm**  
Great Western Road Walk
- Saturday, 12th October, 3.00 pm**  
Visit to Rockland, Helensburgh
- Sunday, 13th October, 2.30 pm**  
Great Western Road Walk
- Sunday, 26th October, 3.00 pm**  
Visit to Arran View, Airdrie
- Monday, 4th November, 6.30 pm**  
Annual General Meeting
- Sunday, 9th November**  
Neo-Classical Edinburgh



## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

MONDAY, 4TH  
NOVEMBER

The most important forthcoming event is our first Annual General Meeting, which is to be held at 6.30 pm on Monday, 4th November in the Banqueting Hall of the City Chambers, George Square, by kind permission of Glasgow City Council. Refreshments will be served.

It is hoped that as many members as possible will attend this AGM as the Alexander Thomson Society is at present unconstitutional, as it were, and needs to be established on a proper basis. A constitution must be approved and a committee and honorary officers properly elected. Once this is done, it will give us greater authority in our primary task of fighting to protect Alexander Thomson's work.



### GREAT WESTERN WALKS

SUNDAY, 6TH AND  
13TH OCTOBER

Roger Guthrie will lead afternoon walks along Great Western Road looking at buildings by Thomson and others. There is no need to book. The walk will begin at 2.30 pm: please gather at the entrance to Kelvinbridge subway

station on Great Western Road.



### ROCKLAND, HELENSBURGH

SATURDAY, 12TH  
OCTOBER

Afternoon visit to Rockland, Helensburgh, by courtesy of Professor and Mrs Gavin Arneil. This is an opportunity to see the spectacular and richly decorated interior of this comparatively early Thomson villa before it is sold.

Booking for this visit is not necessary, although a charge of £1 will be collected on the day. We shall travel on the 13.59 train from Queen Street (Low Level) to Helensburgh, but get off at CRAIGENDORAN (the station before Helensburgh) at 14.39, where we will assemble and proceed to Rockland, which is a short walk from the station. Those travelling by other means should arrive at Rockland, 150 East Clyde Street, Helensburgh) at 3.00 pm, not before.



### ROCK VIEW, AIRDRIE

SUNDAY, 26TH  
OCTOBER

Afternoon visit to Rock View, Airdrie, the villa of c.1868 which is convincingly attributed to

Thomson. This visit is being organised by Mark Baines, who designed the two modern blocks in the grounds of the house, each containing six flats, which were built in 1986-87 in a style sympathetic to Thomson.

Booking for this visit is not necessary, although a charge of £1 will be collected on the day. We shall travel on the 14.28 train from Queen Street (Low Level) arriving at 14.54 at AIRDRIE station, where we will assemble and then walk to the house. Those travelling independently should arrive at Arran View (Arran Drive, Airdrie) at 3.00 pm.



### NEO-CLASSICAL EDINBURGH

SATURDAY,  
NOVEMBER 9TH

This day in Edinburgh will visit Neo-Classical buildings in Edinburgh by Thomas Hamilton and William Playfair that Thomson would have known, including one of the two buildings that he thought were the finest examples of modern architecture in Britain: Playfair's Royal Scottish High School (the other being St George's Hall, Liverpool). It is also hoped to see architectural drawings by Hamilton and others in the course of the day. If you would like to come on this Edinburgh visit please send a stamped addressed envelope to Gavin Stamp, 1 Moray Place, Glasgow G41 2AQ.



## Future Activities

For a voluntary society to have successful activities requires both members taking part and volunteers to organise them. As yet we have no Events Secretary and the organisation of visits and tours must take second place to our primary task, which is lobbying on behalf of Thomson's endangered buildings.

Ideas for future activities include a winter lecture series about Thomson and his contemporaries, visits to more of his houses outside Glasgow in the spring and excursions to Aberdeen, Liverpool, and even to Paisley. The Acting Secretary not only welcomes ideas for future events but would also be glad to hear from any member who is prepared to organise them.



# CASES

*Continued from Page 1*

planning permission being obtained to develop the grounds. In June the Carville Group (Scotland) Ltd approached Glasgow District Council to investigate the likelihood of a scheme to erect around sixty housing units in the Holmwood grounds. The Alexander Thomson Society opposed this vigorously, arguing that any development would jeopardise the long-term aim of restoring Holmwood and opening it to the public; that the excessive development would utterly destroy the house's carefully considered landscape setting (see the perspective in the Blackie book); and that to drive an approach road through the wall linking the house and the stable block would wreck one of the most interesting aspects of the design.

We were supported in our opposition by the Civic Trust, the Georgian Group, the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland, and by the Planning Department of Glasgow District Council. It is good to be able to report that, on July 11th, the Director of Planning, Mr James Rae OBE, wrote to the developers that "the best solution would be for 'Holmwood' and its grounds to be sold as a single family unit or to be taken into the public domain... I could not agree to the density of development you are proposing. Should new housing have to be conceded, I would think in terms of no more than six units on the playing field site and no more than three or four on the site to the rear of Holmwood; even so the development of this part of the property would pose problems in terms of vehicular access as I am not prepared to recommend any access being driven through the garden which links the main villa to the stable block..."

Following a site meeting at the house, at which the Society was represented by Mark Baines, Mr Rae wrote on 30th July that "I believe the interests of Holmwood would be best served by its retention within its present setting, enhanced by the landscaping of the playing field site and the removal of the school buildings to the rear of the villa and that site, too, being suitably landscaped... My contact so far with representatives of the National Trust for Scotland leads me to the belief that they, too, think that there should be no development at Holmwood."

What is most encouraging is that Historic Scotland have taken an even stronger position, for Dr David Walker, Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings, wrote to Glasgow District Council on July 25th stating that "Holmwood is a house which is in the international class and indeed is internationally known. It is the finest house Alexander Thomson ever built, inside and out, and is in a remarkably complete state of preservation... In any scheme for development at Holmwood it is vital that no alteration should be made, or any new building erected, which would disturb either the unity and integrity of Holmwood's architecture or the beauty of its setting... It is a house of such importance that eventually, if not now, it will probably come into some form of public ownership. In the meantime it is vitally important that its architecture and decor must be carefully respected, the latter calling for particularly sympathetic ownership, that nothing should be built which might in any way impair its setting, and that there should be no division in the ownership of the land which would inhibit its proper occupation either now or in the future."

It is not clear what will happen next. It is difficult to imagine a compromise between the aspirations of the developer and the feeling in Glasgow that

Holmwood deserves to be brought into the public realm. We have written to the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions suggesting that the site be split into its original two halves, for we would have no objection to a reasonable development taking place on the land where the house called Sunnyside once stood, providing that access roads do not affect the setting of Holmwood. Meanwhile, we shall continue to encourage conservation bodies who might be interested in acquiring this most lovely Thomson house.



## CALEDONIA ROAD CHURCH

The future of this disgraceful ruin looks a little less gloomy at present. Earlier this year the Scottish Development Agency promised some £1.6 million towards the 'rehabilitation' of what is left of Thomson's church, and a structural survey was carried out under the auspices of the Bridgegate Trust. At the same time, the promised realisation of the Crown Street Regeneration Project for new housing in the Gorbals, for which CZWG Architects won a competition last year, ought to mean that Thomson's design is again given coherence by being integrated into a proper urban setting instead of standing as an isolated, meaningless ruin.

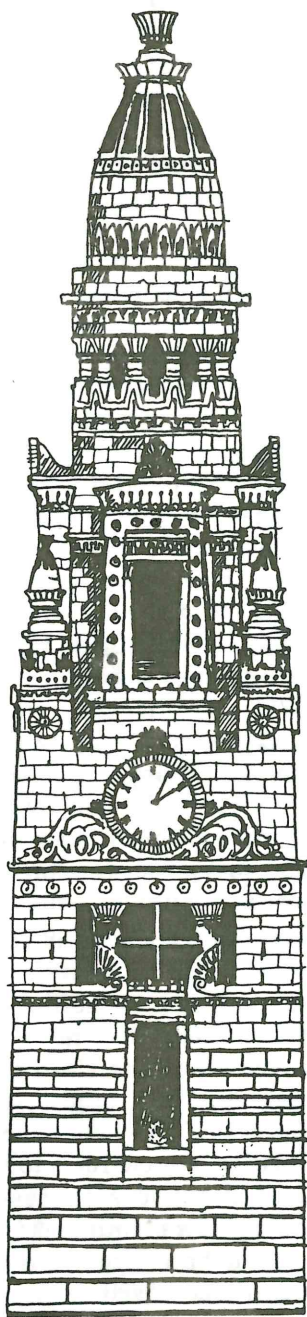
However, stabilisation of the ruin will not be enough. The upper parts of the external walls and clerestory that have been removed since the church was gutted in 1965 ought to be restored and the whole structure would then be roofed over to serve a useful purpose instead of standing as a monument to the insane urban Utopianism of Glasgow's recent self-hating past. At present, however, nothing is happening.





## THE ST VINCENT STREET CHURCH

That the only intact survivor of what Henry-Russell Hitchcock called "three of the finest Romantic Classical churches in the world" by Thomson should still be a cause for concern is surely to Glasgow's shame. The building is owned by Glasgow District Council and leased to a Free Church congregation which likes the building, has



*St Vincent Street Church tower, from 'Some City Glasgow', by Robin Ward, Richard Drew 1982*

maintained the interior and which—as those who attended our inaugural meeting in the church on April 9th will confirm—is hospitable and welcoming to visitors. The District Council has not, however, properly fulfilled the obligations under the lease, for the exterior stonework continues to decay and water has penetrated the structure, causing damage to the polychromatic painted decoration. At about the time of the founding of the Society, scaffolding went up to effect repairs: five months later, scaffolding still disfigures the interior of the building, while the damaged plasterwork and decoration has not been repaired.

The problem would seem to be that the St Vincent Street Church is the responsibility of the District Council's Estates Department which, unlike the Planning Department, seems to have little appreciation of the international importance of the building. At present the Free Church is trying to negotiate a new lease but is being deterred by the Estates Department and the figures being quoted. This seems to be very unfortunate, as experience shows that the best possible use for a church building is as a place of worship—what the architect intended, after all. Until the District Council comes up with some concrete and practicable proposals, it is better that a building be used one day a week than not at all.

Meanwhile, consultants appointed by Glasgow Development Agency are examining possibilities for the future of the building. The society will welcome any proposals that allows greater public access and an external restoration without compromising its integrity as a church, as was the drawback with the abortive Britoil scheme a few years back. Clearly this is something the society should be closely involved in and we are anxious to help in any way to find a solution to preserve and restore this great building.

## Nº 4, GREAT WESTERN TERRACE

The condition of this house in Thomson's grandest terrace has long been a scandal and a worry. We are delighted to be able to report that the District Council is in the process of securing this property by compulsory purchase from owners who have neglected it for years. Unfortunately, water penetration has resulted in serious outbreaks of dry rot and a proper restoration of the magnificent interiors (some of which are Gothic and not by Thomson) will be expensive. At present the District Council is interviewing five parties which have put together proposals to the rehabilitation and re-use of this house.



## EGYPTIAN HALLS, UNION STREET

The continuing forlorn appearance of Egyptian Halls in Union Street is a cause for concern, especially as the tendency of buildings to catch fire in Glasgow was spectacularly demonstrated a little further down Union Street in May. Egyptian Halls is Thomson's finest commercial building and has what is arguably the most splendid facade of any mid-Victorian commercial building in Britain. But while the ground floor is occupied by shops, most of the upper floors are empty.

The problem is that the building is in the hands of multiple owners on whom the District Council has served repairs notices, but with no result as yet. The restoration of Egyptian Halls ought to be a viable commercial proposition, given its site, its size and its fame. But we would strongly resist any attempt merely to preserve the facade, for there seems no reason why Thomson's



surviving interior structure, with its deep floors and reasonable ceiling heights, could not be adapted for modern commercial purposes.

The Society will continue to encourage the District Council to take firm action to protect and secure the future of this magnificent building.



## OTHER WORK

The Society has also been concerned with the following Thomson buildings: 94-106 Otago Street; 41-53 Oakfield Avenue; the Grosvenor Building, Gordon Street; and Tor House, Rothesay. We have also given support to the scheme prepared by Robin Haddow, Architect, to make use of the burned-out ruin of Langside Hill Church designed by Thomson's pupil, Alexander Skirving.

## THOMSON ON SHOW FOR '96?

Julian Spalding, Director of Glasgow Museums & Art Galleries, has confirmed that he intends to mount an exhibition about Alexander Thomson in 1996. The proposal is contained in Glasgow's submission under the Arts 2000 programme to be selected as Visual Arts city in 1996. The result of Glasgow's bid (the other finalists are believed to be Bradford, Hampshire and the North East of England) will be known in January 1992, although it is likely that many of the programmes and exhibitions presented in the Arts 2000 bid will go ahead regardless of whether Glasgow takes the title or not.

The exhibition will be a welcome opportunity to re-establish Thomson's status and to reveal the multiplicity of his talent. We know, for instance, that Thomson designed furniture



*Egyptian Halls, Union Street*

and other non-architectural objects, but almost all of these are dispersed. It is essential that examples of Thomson's furniture are found to exhibit in 1996, so we would welcome any suggestions or clues from members to help find objects designed by him.

## DOORS OPEN DAY, 1991

It is surely a tribute to Thomson that, on Glasgow's second 'Doors Open Day' held on September 14th, the only two private houses open to the public were both by Thomson and both on the South Side: 1 Moray Place and 25A Mansionhouse Road (half of the Double Villa). Each had well over three hundred visitors in the course of the morning.

Which other Glasgow architect designed houses which are famous, which still stand and which remain a pleasure to live in?

## "ALEXANDER 'GREEK' THOMSON: Architect 1817-1875"

We have obtained a consignment of copies of the paperback about Thomson published by the Architectural Association in conjunction with the exhibition mounted first at the Third Eye Centre in 1984. The book, with essays by Andrew MacMillan, John McKean and Mark Baines, has been unobtainable in Glasgow for some time. Copies are available from the Acting Secretary at £4.50 plus £1.00 postage and packing. Please make cheques payable to the 'Alexander Thomson Society' and allow 21 days for delivery.

The Acting Secretary would welcome any items of interest about Thomson and Thomson buildings for inclusion in future numbers of this Newsletter. The more people who contribute to it, the better.

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Tel: 041 221 2469 Fax: 041 204 4619*